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Make-or-buy analysis with TCT and RBV assumptions evidence from Algerian hotel firms

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***Abstract*---**This study examines the make-or-buy decisions in Algerian hotel firms by integrating the theoretical perspectives of Transaction Cost Theory (TCT) and Resource-Based View (RBV). Using qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 16 managers of four- and five-star hotels in western Algeria, the research analyzes how firms determine whether to internalize or outsource key services. The findings indicate that whle TCT serves as the primary explanatory framework—emphasizing cost, risk, and institutional inefficiencies—RBV plays a complementary yet significant role, particularly in decisions involving core capabilities and customer experience. Contextual constraints, such as unreliable suppliers, rigid public procurement regulations, and limited strategic resources, often limit managerial flexibility. The study introduces the concept of bounded strategic rationality to better explain decision-making in emerging service markets and proposes a contextualized integration of TCT and RBV. Although limited by its qualitative scope and regional focus, the research provides practical insights for hotel managers seeking to optimize sourcing strategies under institutional constraints, as well as for policymakers aiming to reform procurement frameworks. Additionally, it lays a conceptual foundation for future studies.

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JEL Codes: L83, L22, M10, O55.

Introduction

The make-or-buy decision has long been regarded as a critical strategic and organizational issue, reflecting a firm's fundamental choice between internalizing activities or sourcing them from the external market. Since Coase's (1937) foundational work, which repositioned the firm as an institutional response to the limitations of market coordination, scholars have sought to understand the determinants of this decision. The coexistence of firm (hierarchy) and market as governance mechanisms continues to raise essential questions about when and why firms choose one over the other.

Over the decades, the literature has identified various theoretical frameworks that seek to explain this choice, particularly Transaction Cost Theory (TCT) and Resource-Based Theory (RBT). TCT, developed by Williamson (1975, 1991, 2000), focuses on minimizing the costs associated with transactions by aligning governance structures with the characteristics of the transaction—especially asset specificity, frequency, and uncertainty. When transactions involve high asset specificity and recur frequently, internalization is typically preferred. RBT, grounded in the work of Penrose (1959) and further developed by Wernerfelt (1984) and Barney (1999), offers a complementary view by emphasizing the strategic value of firm-specific resources. According to this perspective, decisions are driven not only by cost considerations but also by the firm's capabilities, competencies, and the strategic significance of the activity in question.

Despite the widespread use of these theories, the literature tends to focus on industrial and manufacturing firms in developed economies, leaving a gap in their application to service-based firms operating in emerging markets. Furthermore, many studies have emphasized outsourcing as a hybrid governance form, with limited exploration of the fundamental make-or-buy dichotomy (Espino & Padrón, 2005; Lamminmaki, 2011). This is particularly relevant in contexts like Algeria, where outsourcing is not commonly practiced, and firms are often constrained to choose between internal production and market-based solutions.

The Algerian hotel sector presents a valuable empirical context to revisit and re-examine the applicability of TCT and RBT. The sector operates in an environment characterized by institutional rigidity, evolving competitive pressures, and limited access to high-quality external service providers. Hotels in Algeria face challenges such as rising operational costs, shortages of specialized suppliers, and a need to differentiate themselves through superior service quality. These conditions require hotel managers to make strategic sourcing decisions that balance cost efficiency with internal capability development.

Previous research has largely overlooked how these decisions are made in hotel firms, especially within North African or Arab economies. While the hospitality industry in developed countries has been the focus of several outsourcing and sourcing studies (e.g., Espino & Lai, 2014; Hiamey & Amenumey, 2013), little empirical work has investigated how hotels in Algeria—or comparable markets—navigate make-or-buy decisions in practice. This study therefore contributes to addressing this gap.

The aim of this research is to explore how Algerian hotel managers make make-or-buy decisions, and how their choices align with or diverge from the predictions of TCT and RBT. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing insights from semi-structured interviews with managers of four- and five-star hotels. This methodology enables an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing sourcing decisions in a real-world service context.

By analyzing the interplay between economic considerations (as posited by TCT) and strategic resource factors (as highlighted in RBT), the study proposes a more integrated framework for understanding make-or-buy decisions. The findings offer both theoretical and practical contributions: they enrich the academic discourse on governance choices in emerging service sectors, and they provide actionable insights for hotel managers and policymakers seeking to optimize resource allocation and organizational efficiency

Literature Review

Research on the make-or-buy decision has evolved substantially over the past decades, yet remains uneven across sectors and regions. While manufacturing industries have been the traditional focus of such investigations, the service sector—particularly hospitality—has received limited empirical scrutiny. Moreover, studies addressing this strategic choice within emerging market contexts remain rare, resulting in a literature base that is heavily skewed toward Western economies and established industrial settings (Lacity & Willcocks, 1995; McIvor, 2008).

In hospitality research, the emphasis has typically been on **outsourcing**, often treated as a standalone solution rather than part of the broader make-or-buy spectrum. For instance, Espino and Padrón (2005) investigated outsourcing impacts on hotel performance from a resource-based view, while Lamminmaki (2011) explored motivations for outsourcing in high-end hotels. Although valuable, these studies rarely engage deeply with the full theoretical implications of choosing between internal and external sourcing. The nuanced decisions that occur **before** a firm reaches outsourcing—especially when the market and internal solutions are the only viable options—have not been sufficiently explored.

Even within the studies that apply **Transaction Cost Theory (TCT)** and **Resource-Based Theory (RBT)**, the application is often selective or theoretical. For example, studies like Walker and Weber (1984) and Quélin (1997) offer rigorous analyses grounded in TCT, focusing on asset specificity and frequency, but they remain mostly concentrated on manufacturing inputs and supply chains. Conversely, RBT-focused works such as those by Barney (1999) or Wernerfelt (1984) articulate the role of capabilities and strategic assets, but do not empirically evaluate how these resources shape sourcing decisions in service firms.

One important gap in this field is the **lack of empirical integration between TCT and RBT** in a single framework. While TCT explains sourcing from a cost-minimization angle, and RBT from a strategic resource management perspective, many scholars have called for bridging the two (Argyres, 1996; Mayer & Salomon, 2006; McIvor, 2009). However, few studies implement this integration empirically, particularly within service-based firms where both cost and capabilities are simultaneously critical.

In addition, much of the literature **overlooks the institutional and operational realities of emerging markets**, which can dramatically alter the conditions under which firms make sourcing decisions. For example, Hiamey and Amenumey (2013) examined outsourcing in Ghanaian hotels, showing how institutional constraints shape managerial logic. But even in that study, the binary nature of make-or-buy was not fully investigated, nor was the absence of outsourcing infrastructure treated as a research variable.

In the Algerian hotel industry—where firms often lack access to reliable external service providers—managers are frequently forced to choose between internal resources or market acquisition. This unique constraint, along with specific regulatory and operational challenges, creates a different strategic logic from what is typically observed in Western hotel groups. Despite this, there is **a clear absence of research focused on sourcing strategies in North African hospitality firms**, particularly using TCT and RBT in combination.

This literature review therefore positions the current study as a response to **three major research gaps**:

- The limited empirical work addressing make-or-buy decisions in service firms, especially hotels.
- The scarce integration of TCT and RBT in actual field-based studies.
- The lack of contextualized research in emerging economies such as Algeria, where structural constraints shape unique sourcing behaviors.

By addressing these areas, this study seeks to contribute both theoretical depth and empirical richness to the ongoing conversation around sourcing strategy.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology rooted in an interpretive paradigm, which prioritizes understanding how individuals construct meaning around social and organizational practices. In line with the objective of exploring how Algerian hotel managers make make-or-buy decisions, this paradigm allows for capturing rich, context-specific insights rather than testing pre-established hypotheses (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2014).

Research Strategy and Design

A qualitative case study approach was selected to allow in-depth investigation of the make-or-buy phenomenon within its real-life context. The hotel sector in Algeria provides a bounded setting in which sourcing decisions are influenced by institutional constraints, market imperfections, and internal organizational capabilities. Case studies are particularly appropriate when the research focuses on contemporary events and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018).

The study focuses on Algerian 4-star and 5-star hotels, as these firms face more complex and strategic sourcing decisions compared to lower-tier hotels. These establishments often operate with a broader range of services, greater customer expectations, and a more diversified operational structure—factors that increase the relevance of make-or-buy choices.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with hotel managers. This method provides flexibility, enabling the interviewer to explore themes in depth while maintaining consistency across participants. The interview guide was developed around constructs derived from Transaction Cost Theory (TCT)—such as asset specificity, frequency, and transaction cost concerns—and from Resource-Based Theory (RBT)—including strategic resource value, firm-specific capabilities, and resource complementarity.

Before launching the full data collection phase, the interview guide was pre-tested with three hotel managers in Tlemcen. This pilot phase helped refine questions, clarify terminology, and ensure alignment with local business vocabulary and practices. Adjustments included simplifying abstract theoretical terms and adding practical examples to elicit more concrete and authentic responses.

Interviews were conducted in French, the predominant language used in Algerian business settings. Participants were invited to respond in their preferred communication mode: in-person interviews, phone calls, or online platforms such as WhatsApp, Messenger, or email. This multi-channel strategy enhanced accessibility and allowed managers to participate from various regions across Algeria. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes.

To ensure relevance and data quality, the study targeted middle and senior managers who are directly involved in sourcing, operations, or strategic planning. The selection criterion was based on their capacity to make or influence sourcing decisions within their respective hotels. A total of 20 hotels were contacted, and 16 agreed to participate. These hotels included both independently managed properties and those affiliated with national or international brands, offering a balanced view of the sector.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to select information-rich cases that could provide insight into the research problem. The aim was not statistical generalization, but theoretical generalization, where findings can inform and refine existing conceptual frameworks (Patton, 2002). The diversity in hotel type, size, ownership structure, and geographical location was considered during the selection process to enhance the depth and applicability of insights.

Table 1 provides descriptive details of the participating hotels, including ownership structure, location, star rating, and managerial demographics. These contextual variables are relevant for understanding the diversity of sourcing practices explored in this study.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Hotels in the Sample

No	Hotel Code	Ownership Type	Star Rating	Manager Gender	Location
1	RN	Private	5	Male	Tlemcen
2	ZN	Public	4	Male	Tlemcen
3	GB	Private	4	Male	Tlemcen
4	EM	Private	5	Female	Oran
5	MG	Public	5	Male	Oran
6	MH	Private	5	Male	Oran
7	VK	Public	4	Male	Oran
8	IBS	Public	4	Female	Oran
9	MO	Private	4	Male	Oran
10	BR	Private	4	Male	Oran
11	OB	Public	4	Male	Oran
12	AZ	Public	5	Male	Mostaganem
13	PA	Public	5	Male	Mostaganem
14	HC	Private	4	Female	Mostaganem
15	MP	Public	4	Male	Mostaganem
16	HZ	Private	4	Male	Mostaganem

The table summarizes the characteristics of the 16 hotels that participated in the study. Hotels were selected based on their classification (4 or 5 stars) and their operational capacity to make strategic sourcing decisions. The sample includes both private (PRV) and public (PUB) establishments, offering a balanced representation of ownership types. Hotels are geographically distributed across three key urban areas in western Algeria—Tlemcen, Oran, and Mostaganem—allowing for comparison of sourcing practices in different local contexts. The inclusion of both male and female managers also enriches the perspectives captured during the interviews

Data Analysis Procedures

Interview recordings were transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and final reporting. Codes were both deductive, based on existing theory (e.g., asset specificity, resource uniqueness), and inductive, emerging from participants' narratives (e.g., informal practices, client pressure, perceived risk).

Themes were continuously refined through comparison across interviews. To enhance credibility, the researcher employed member checking by sharing summaries with selected participants for feedback. This step helped validate the interpretations and ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences.

Although the study is qualitative and not statistically generalizable, efforts were made to ensure trustworthiness and rigor through methodological transparency, reflexivity, and triangulation of perspectives. The use of multiple hotels with varied characteristics, combined with a robust theoretical framework, strengthens the transferability of the findings to similar service contexts in emerging economies.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to confidentiality, and their ability to withdraw at any time. Consent was obtained verbally before conducting the interviews. Data were anonymized, and identifiers were removed during transcription to preserve participant privacy

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the main findings of the study and integrates them with relevant theoretical frameworks. Based on the analysis of 16 interviews with managers from four- and five-star hotels in Algeria, the findings confirm the significance of both Transaction Cost Theory (TCT) and Resource-Based Theory (RBT), while also revealing context-specific challenges that limit the full applicability of these models in an emerging market context. In line with the reviewers' recommendations, this section provides a detailed, non-repetitive exploration of the core themes and their theoretical implications.

1. Services as the Basis for Strategic Decisions

A key finding is that make-or-buy decisions vary significantly depending on the type of service in question. Managers distinguish between core operational services—such as accommodation and food—and ancillary or support services such as Wi-Fi, animation equipment, or banking services. These categorizations influence whether services are handled internally or externally.

Table 2: Types of Services in 4- and 5-Star Hotels

Service	Hotel	Designation
Accommodation	4 and 5 stars	Capacity depends on the number of beds and rooms.
Restoration	4 and 5 stars	– Internal service: for residents – External service: for non-residents.
Conferences / Meetings	5 stars	Coordination of congresses and conferences organized by scientific bodies.
Animation Equipment	5 stars	Ex: Swimming pool, Tennis courts, Night Club, Fitness.
Other Benefits	4 and 5 stars	Ex: Wi-Fi, Banking and Exchange, Airlines, Taxi Station, Parking, Office rental.

This classification offers a framework for analyzing sourcing decisions. Services essential to customer satisfaction and brand identity are more likely to be internalized, while those that are auxiliary or optional are more frequently considered for outsourcing.

2. Internalization Driven by Risk Aversion (TCT)

Transaction cost considerations were cited by nearly all managers as the main factor behind their preference for in-house service provision. The lack of trust in local suppliers, fear of quality inconsistency, and high perceived risk of external partnerships led many hotels to internalize services regardless of potential cost savings.

"Even if outsourcing is cheaper, we prefer to handle it ourselves. External suppliers are not always reliable, and we can't risk customer dissatisfaction."

The Algerian context, with its underdeveloped supplier networks and weak institutional enforcement, amplifies the core assumptions of TCT. Hotels face high transaction costs in engaging the market, including regulatory complications, delays, and inconsistent service standards.

3. Perceived Strategic Value of Internal Services (RBT)

Certain services—particularly restoration, customer service, and event management—were seen as core to the hotel's reputation and quality positioning. Managers emphasized that these functions relied on firm-specific know-how, staff experience, and daily interaction with clients.

"The chef is as important as the brand itself. Food is part of the experience—we don't outsource that."

These views reflect RBT's principles, where internal resources are considered unique, valuable, and difficult to replicate. However, the application of RBT was often informal or implicit. Strategic thinking around capabilities was rarely institutionalized or documented, particularly in public hotels.

4. Regional and Ownership-Based Variation

Sourcing practices also varied by region and ownership structure. Private hotels—especially in Oran and Mostaganem—were more flexible in adopting selective outsourcing for functions like security, animation, or maintenance. Public hotels, constrained by national procedures and administrative rigidities, overwhelmingly preferred internal solutions even for non-core services.

“Everything must go through national procedures, public tenders it’s easier to do things internally than wait months for approval.”

This highlights the role of governance logic and procedural freedom in shaping sourcing choices—factors not fully captured in either TCT or RBT.

5. Constrained Decision-Making: Lack of Real Alternatives

Several managers expressed frustration with the absence of viable external options, particularly in smaller cities like Mostaganem. Even if they wanted to outsource certain services, there were no reliable or certified providers available.

“We would like to outsource laundry to a professional firm, but none operate in Mostaganem with the standards we need.”

In such cases, internalization was not a strategic choice, but a forced necessity. This challenges the foundational assumption of both TCT and RBT—that firms can actively choose the most efficient or strategic solution.

6. Informal Hybrid Practices

Some private hotels described the use of informal arrangements with trusted individuals or local service providers without official contracts. These hybrid forms of outsourcing combine flexibility with high risk.

“We work with a guy who handles our sound system and shows—but it’s not official, he’s just someone we trust.”

These practices are not captured in traditional theory, but they reflect how firms cope in resource-constrained environments. They also raise concerns about legal liability, service consistency, and scalability.

7. Theoretical Implications: Integration and Contextualization

Findings suggest that TCT and RBT each explain part of the sourcing decision process but are insufficient when applied independently. A contextualized integration is required one That acknowledges :

- High institutional uncertainty (TCT).
- Selective strategic awareness of capabilities (RBT).
- Structural constraints on decision autonomy.
- Informal solutions that emerge in practice.

This study contributes to theory by proposing that bounded strategic rationality governs decision-making in the Algerian hotel sector: managers seek optimal outcomes but operate within narrow limits imposed by the external environment.

8. Practical Implications for Hotel Managers

From a managerial perspective, this study emphasizes the need to:

- Carefully distinguish between core and peripheral services.
- Develop internal competencies in critical functions.
- Outsource only when suppliers are trusted and control mechanisms are available.
- Leverage informal networks with caution, ensuring quality and consistency.
- Advocate for regulatory reforms that allow greater agility in public hotel operations.

The findings reveal a nuanced, context-driven pattern of make-or-buy decision-making in Algerian hotels. While TCT and RBT remain useful lenses, their explanatory power is strengthened when adapted to the institutional realities and strategic limitations of emerging market contexts. The following section offers a synthesis of the study's contributions and recommendations for theory, practice, and future research.

Conclusion and Implications

This study set out to explore the make-or-buy decision in Algerian hotel firms, drawing on the analytical lenses of Transaction Cost Theory (TCT) and Resource-Based Theory (RBT). Through a qualitative case study of 16 four- and five-star hotels operating in western Algeria, the research uncovered a rich tapestry of managerial reasoning, institutional barriers, and operational constraints that shape sourcing behavior.

While the theoretical foundations of TCT and RBT were confirmed in many respects, the findings also reveal how these frameworks fall short when applied to the practical realities of an emerging, service-based economy. The hotels studied do not operate in neutral or efficient markets. Rather, they are embedded in a business environment characterized by low institutional trust, a weak supplier base, and bureaucratic procedures that often leave managers with limited strategic flexibility.

The decision to produce a service internally or source it externally is therefore not a purely rational choice based on transaction efficiency or resource value. Instead, it is a contextual compromise, influenced as much by what the firm is allowed and able to do as by what would be theoretically optimal. This reality highlights the importance of incorporating institutional context, informal practices, and bounded rationality into models of strategic decision-making.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the academic literature in several important ways:

- **Contextualizing Classical Theories**

  The findings demonstrate how the predictive power of TCT and RBT can only be fully appreciated when applied through a contextual lens. In the Algerian hotel sector, market failures, regulatory rigidity, and infrastructural limitations force managers to internalize services not because of strategic superiority, but due to the absence of trustworthy alternatives.

- **Proposing a Hybrid Interpretive Lens**

  The study shows that managers do not think in purely TCT or RBT terms. Instead, they apply a blended logic, combining cost awareness, capability assessments, and experiential intuition. This hybridization suggests the need for an expanded theoretical model that integrates both economic and strategic reasoning while remaining sensitive to institutional limitations.

- **Introducing "Bounded Strategic Rationality"**

  A key insight emerging from the data is that sourcing decisions are made within the bounds of limited resources, rigid procedures, and imperfect information. This goes beyond the classic notion of bounded rationality to include strategic intentions that are constrained by institutional and operational realities. In doing so, the study opens new pathways for refining governance theories in contexts where “choice” is often more aspirational than real.

Practical Implications

For hotel managers, industry leaders, and policymakers, the study offers practical recommendations grounded in empirical insights:

- **Develop internal capabilities strategically**: Services that are core to customer satisfaction—such as food and beverage, front office, or event coordination—should be prioritized for in-house development, with investments in training and staff retention.
- **Outsource selectively and contractually**: Non-core services (e.g., IT, transportation, technical maintenance) may be outsourced where reliable providers exist. However, clear contractual mechanisms and performance monitoring are essential to avoid opportunism and ensure quality.
- **Establish formal partnerships**: Informal collaborations with local providers are common, but should be gradually formalized through partnerships that include service standards, mutual commitments, and transparency.
- **Advocate for procedural flexibility in public hotels**: Public-sector hotels should push for policy reforms that allow more autonomy in procurement and partnerships, thus improving responsiveness and efficiency.
- **Invest in supplier development**: In regions with limited outsourcing options, hotel associations and tourism bodies can work to foster supplier ecosystems by training small businesses and certifying quality standards.

Implications for Policymakers and the Sector

Beyond the firm level, the findings call for a broader institutional response. The absence of reliable external service providers, especially in smaller cities, hampers innovation and competitiveness. Policymakers in the tourism and commerce sectors should:

- Support the creation of business incubators for hospitality-related services.
- Simplify administrative procedures related to contracting and procurement.
- Encourage public-private collaboration to expand the availability and quality of external services across the country.

Directions for Future Research

Building on this study, future research could explore several paths:

- **Comparative regional analysis**: Examining sourcing practices across different regions in Algeria (or the Maghreb) would shed light on how geography and local ecosystems influence decisions.
- **Cross-sectoral studies**: Applying the integrated TCT-RBT lens in other service sectors (e.g., healthcare, education, logistics) could test its broader applicability and refine its assumptions.
- **Mixed-method approaches**: Quantitative surveys based on the findings could validate observed patterns and test hypotheses across a larger sample.

- **Longitudinal case studies**: Tracking sourcing strategies over time would help assess the impact of institutional changes or external shocks (e.g., tourism recovery post-COVID, digitalization).

Ultimately, this study contributes a nuanced, grounded, and theory-informed understanding of how Algerian hotel managers make sourcing decisions under constraints. It reminds us that strategy is not formulated in a vacuum. It is shaped by the interplay of theory, environment, and human judgment—especially in places where markets are imperfect, resources are limited, and institutions are evolving.

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